

Rumi visionary, lover, saint, mystic

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Mystical Experience; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

What does this 14th century Islamic mystic, a man from a different time and a different culture, have to offer us? What is it about Rumi's poems – which most of us cannot read in their original language – that makes us want to go back to them time and again? Why do we feel a thrill of recognition when we read them 700 years after they were written?

First of all Rumi is dangerous. Beware those who enter his interior world. If you read him with an open and attentive heart, he will turn you inside out and leave you dazed, fearful, amazed and exultant; you will have entered the domain of one of the greatest of mystics in the history of human spiritual life, one who has the uncanny sensibility of a shaman, the mysterious ambivalent aura of a visionary, who dares you to tread on the same path as he has done. Whereas Rumi's elder contemporary, Farid-uddin Attar, who wrote a marvellous allegorical poem *describing* the journey of the soul to the Divine called *The Conference of the Birds*, Rumi *enacts* the journey with his powerful, intoxicating verse.

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Rumi's poetry is like a dense forest filled with wild beasts, with birds of exotic plumage and abiding grace, with clearings where the sunlight falls in great torrents, or the moonlight dances with a delicate coolness like spring water. He drags you screaming, crying, laughing, and delighting into a vision of the Beloved who represents the Divine. If you read his poetry with empathy you may become a lover filled with your own longing and desire for the Beloved; you will seek ecstatic consummation, the abolition of the self, the dissolution of self-will, the submission of the ego to the Greater which is one of the Muslim names for Allah or God. But first, Rumi tells us, we must create silence in ourselves, or allow silence to enter us. Throughout his voluminous writings, both poetry and prose, he exhorts us to be silent, to value the precious silence on which all great poetry and spirituality is based, from which we recuperate our true selves; that necessary emptiness from which we weave meaning from our lives.

Even though he wrote thousands of verses and a substantial corpus of prose works, Rumi emphasises that it is not through words but through experience, which Rumi describes as "...felt not spoken..." that the Truth is known. He wrote in his Discourses, prose parables which were in effect a commentary on his poetry, that his words were "... for the person who needs words in order to comprehend. There is no need for words with the one who can comprehend without words. After all, heaven and earth are a discourse for the one who

comprehends it, born as they are from the utterance "Be and it is". What need has a man who can hear a soft voice for shouting and yelling?" The dilemma of the Real for Rumi was beyond representation, and conceptual knowledge which is always partial, mostly suppressed and finally blind.

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Rumi was against pedants and although he was a reputable Islamic scholar, he was suspicious of conceptual knowledge: he used language with consummate skill; his poetry is regarded by Persians as akin to the language of the Qur'an which is prized by all Muslims for its incomparable beauty and wisdom. However, Rumi learnt from his teacher Shams e Tabriz – who came into his life when he was already a well-known and respected scholar and turned his life upside down with his esoteric teachings – to be wary of language and ideas. Shams was critical of worldly knowledge as opposed to the visionary intensity of ecstatic experience, he wrote: "Why do you acquire knowledge for the purpose of a worldly morsel? The purpose of this rope is to lift yourselves out of the pit, not so that you can climb out of this pit and into deeper pits. Fix your sight on knowing who you are, what your essence is, why you have come here, where you are going, and what the source of your being is. What are you doing at this very

moment? Where are you headed?” This 12/13th century wandering mystic propounded an existential knowledge that was austere and psychologically astute.

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Rumi’s poetry attains the condition of music, the form and substance are inextricable; at its heart is music and dance, the mime of the Beloved. Many mystics have said that the word of God is not a word but a note of music. Rumi understood this. He worshipped God through the longing and love expressed in his poetry – a form of music – through music itself and through *sama*, the sacred whirling dance which combines a profound stillness in the graceful folds of movement. For Rumi poetry, especially mystical poetry with its beauty and charismatic power was a transformative experience or it was nothing.

This is heady stuff; drink too fast and too much, and you risk becoming distracted, besotted and misguided. To lose oneself as Rumi shows us, we must first learn to value and love ourselves, we must learn the secret of trust and of loving our neighbours and the world we live in; to jump into the Abyss (another name for God) which is the Greater. To leap off the cliff into the uncertain air and trust oneself is to travel closer to the Divine. To love the Divine is to become drunk with the Beloved, Rumi writes:

*And this is Love – the vertigo
of heaven
Beyond the cage of words.*

His poetry is vertiginous too, it entices and flatters the ear and the imagination, it expresses itself in bewilderment, paradox and with sometimes terrifying depth which can provoke us to go on an inner journey of the spirit, and which, as Rumi himself knew, can be perilous for it leads to the disintegration of the self and compels us to re-think who we are and what we hold dear.

Rumi is a saint for Muslims.

Rumi does not attempt to pacify us with bland confections of imagined solace; he does not appease but invites us to dance towards the Beloved who is both laughing daylight and mysterious night. He is dangerous because in his poetry, if we read it intelligently and with attentiveness, we learn to imagine the depths of our own need. We are faced with violent confrontations of the spirit; we are bowled over with the energy of his verse, its erotic power which engages us with charged exchanges, with delicate whisperings between ourselves and the Beloved, which are as light and elusive as the wings of a humming bird. Rumi tells us that his words are living things. He sings out:

*These words of mine
are no stones
To pick and throw
at passing fancies.
They’re yeast sounds,
bread waiting*

*To be broken whilst
they're still fresh.
Leave them overnight
and they become
Hard as rusting bolts,
not fit for eating...*

He is calling his reader/listeners to urgent action and passionate realisation of the path to the Greater. We are confronted by the *mysterium tremendum* which shocks us into an inward reality no words can purchase or re-enact.

Rumi's poetry tries to leap out from the boundaries of conceptual thought into the absolute of visionary experience

Rumi is a saint for Muslims. He is a poet who has written unsurpassable verse in honour of the Beloved. He is a visionary, a poet of exquisite taste and ear, but whose poetry is still grounded in daily life. He teaches us to tap into our inner self, to become ourselves and to lose the ego that binds and blinds. Like Plato, Rumi was concerned with the inner freedom of the soul, but he tried to attain this state of bliss not through argument but through prayer, invocation, dance, music and poetry.

As I have indicated, Rumi's poetry tries to leap out from the boundaries of conceptual thought into the absolute of visionary experience; if it fails to do so entirely it is because he uses words which are wedded to thought. However, the important thing is that it suggests, it creates the possibility and by its musi-

cality and implicit dancing tensions, it reflects the ecstatic union with the Beloved. His verse is filled with longing setting out from a barren domain towards the Divine presence. Without the Beloved, Rumi finds the world a dead place; his words reach out to the Beloved, as he writes:

*Wherever the rainbow
of your face alights
Be it the dank gorge of a well,
it's paradise....
Your absence makes beauty
horror, widowing my sight.*

*Without the sense of the Divine
there is no meaning, without
meaning there is no Love and
therefore no Reality.*

In his *Divan* or lyrical poems to his beloved teacher and guide Shams-e Tabriz, Rumi's words ache with longing and desire to attain a speechless union with the Beloved. These poems are a sort of drunken, ecstatic expression of love and longing which at the same time are based on a deep sense of humility impelled by a special turning energy towards the transcendence of the self into the greater whole. Rumi exhorts his readers and listeners to attain this condition of bliss, but this is not something that can be done simply because one wants to be there with Rumi and the other ecstatic mystics, to share in their experience of the Divine. Rumi tells us:

*Light up a fire of love
within your soul*

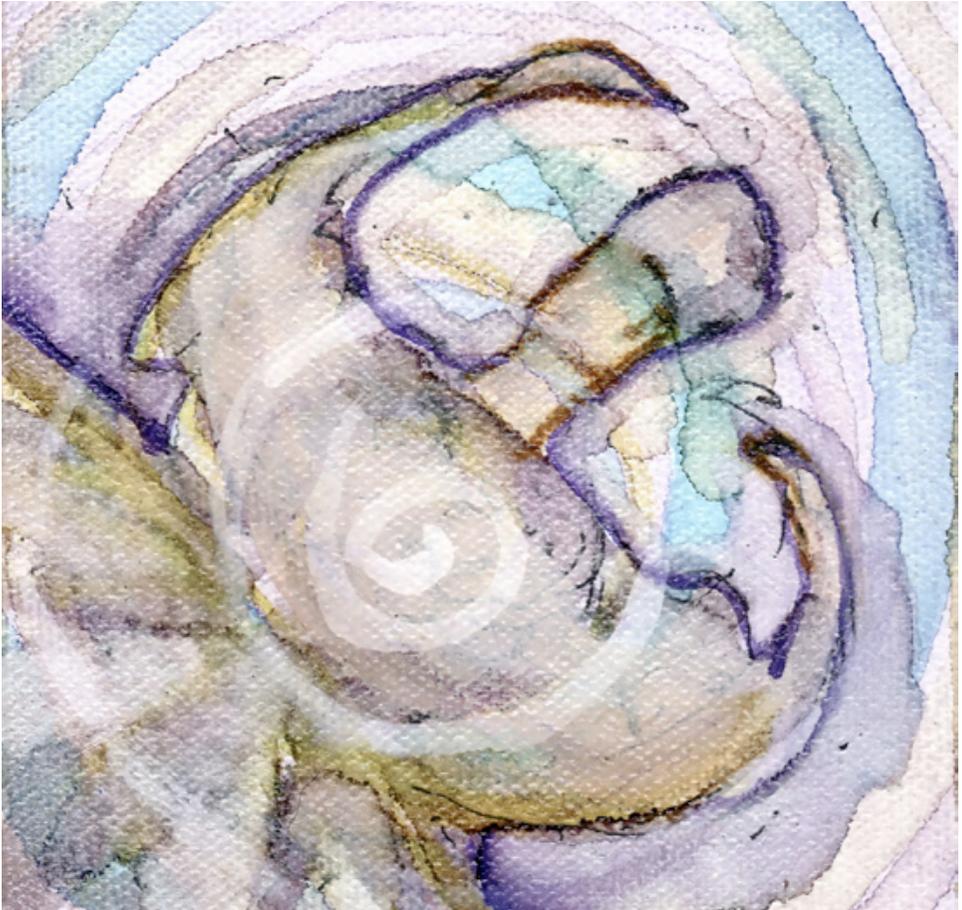
Rumi – visionary, lover, saint, mystic

*Burn up these thoughts and
words from head to toe!*

If the end of Rumi's poetry is the agape of compassion and extinction of the self, the process of his poetry, its pace and passion is *energia* and *eros*. His tone, his impassioned expression, his Orphic longing and desire for the forcing ecstasy of annihilation into the Greater – the moth drawn to the flame and consumed by it – is erotic; for it claims intimacy, anguish and an almost carnal love for the Beloved. He cries out:

*We are the fingertips of
blind illusion,
You are the absolute Cause
of causes.
You sing us into being,
quick-fading echoes,
We're like heraldic lions
on folded flags,
One breath from you and
we are unfurled
For a fluttering moment on your
dancing breath.*

Seeking the Divine; original art, Lonnie Hanzons



Its prancing images that compose a hypnotic musicality and the urgent rhythms of his verse which create a transformative catalytic power in his poetry, beckon the reader/listener to attain deep knowledge at the intersection between time and eternity, intimated by his song lines of the soul. We must beware his words, be aware of the electric charge that may burn and foment inner turmoil in the reader and listener as much as they can bring a graceful serenity; we must listen to his verse with ears that distinguish the beauty of their erotic arc of retrieval of the Beloved from simple egoistical possession which demeans and brutalises rather than purifies. He invites his readers and listeners to enter the realm of ecstatic apotheosis of the annihilation of the self. The giddy energy of his poetry acts as midwife to foetal souls seeking the Divine. His words perform the votive process of transcendence without a safety net: they are a risky undertaking and reflect Rumi's own suffering on his journey to the Beloved. To read Rumi wisely implies a degree of self-knowledge which is indeed awakened by the words them-

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selves, and the cadences of his searching poems. His poetry seduces and delights as it instructs and at times harries us into recollection, as it reminds us to let go of our egos for a new consciousness, as we dredge through language to distil an alluvia of lived meanings consciously and unconsciously.

With his poetry Rumi invites to the possibility of paradise where the Beloved and the Lover become one. He writes:

*Seated here attached to the presence
of this royal place
We are a singing joy, you and I.
Two in form two in figure, two
to the outward eye
We're one in one, you and I...*

Rumi confronts us with a paradox: he encourages, invokes and guides, and finally let's discover our own way to the Divine.